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Rebecca Perdomo
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POSITIVE INDIVIDUALISM

BY

REBECCA PERDOMO

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ABSTRACT

I will present and defend the notion of what I call Positive Individualism. Its purpose is to set forth a standard by which people are to treat others and themselves. I consider a common conception of individualism, its flaws, and a process of refining it. I formulate Positive Individualism, an idea in which every individual is valuable and therefore ought to be treated with respect and dignity by others. If this conception and the standards set forth were to be applied, communities would be able to function successfully and without compromising the individual since, as I argue, the individual is the root of decision and action.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Silvia, my father, Fred, and my sister, Monica as well as my boyfriend, Willy, and my best friends who have truly been there for me throughout this last year. Mom, you are nothing but a constant source of inspiration in faith, strength and love. Thank you for being such an incredible person and mother and for always reminding me that I have it in me to keep going, while modeling the qualities which I strive for. Dad, you are the most dedicated and diligent person I know. Thank you for always being an example of hard work, positivity, and resilience and for constantly believing in me and what I do. Mana, since we were children, I have always tried to imitate you as you were the perfect big sister. Thank you for showing me that even when I decided to take a different path that I could still look up to you for guidance and direction. Lastly, thank you to my wonderful boyfriend, Willy, for all your patience, kindness, encouragement, and support during this time.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Every daring attempt to make a great change in existing conditions, every lofty vision of new possibilities for the human race, has been labeled Utopian.” – Emma Goldman (82, Red Emma Speaks)

1.1 Overview

Is there any proper way of synthesizing the unavoidable community and the pervasive individual? I propose that there is. In my attempt to formulate a theory that I will call Positive Individualism, I argue that a proper form of individualism recognizes the value of all human beings, and through that, treats the individual with dignity and respect – regardless of personal differences. An important notion I address is that societies and communities are comprised of groups of individuals, and therefore ought to be constructed in such a way that they benefit the individual allowing her to flourish. That being said, there still remains the challenge of currently existing societies that have particular expectations, rules, and requirements that come with them. It seems to me that in the current state of existence, individuals are heavily subject to societal constraints and are now suppressed and smothered. While some may argue that people have a louder voice today than ever before, I say that we still have a long way to go. I use the term Positive Individualism to urge an approach to society that recognizes that society is founded and dependent upon individuals and therefore ought to focus on individual welfare as its priority. It is distinct in that it is void of the egotism of common individualistic theories so that respect for other individuals as well as the self is its foundation.

As I will use the term, Positive Individualism utilizes a collaboration of notions from fields such as sociology, psychology, ethics, transcendentalism, and political philosophy to establish a refined, rational system intended to create a cohesive and cooperative relationship

between the individual and her community. My objective is to establish what makes an individual important in order explain why societies need individuals with a solid sense of self and value of the other in order to diminish conflict and increase positive interactions as well as productivity. Essentially, I am stating that individuals have value qua individual as opposed to value qua member of a community.

I aim to demonstrate that each and every human being *ought* to be treated with respect. I will accomplish this through a discussion of the human rights to respect and dignity, drawing predominantly from Immanuel Kant and John Locke. I argue that these rights imply a necessary exploration of personal responsibility, its relationship with autonomy, and what that entails. Further along, I explicate the problem of American false individualism, where self-proclaimed individualists are involved in a corrupt system that subdues those in it and forces them into constraints, which consequentially limit the ability to explore and expand, thus inhibiting the individual and perhaps not being so individualistic after all. Following from that is a discussion of technology in the modern world and its effect on the individual. In creating this framework, it is necessary to examine social constructs and norms, for example gender roles and the requirements associated with them, and how they affect the individual. As a corollary implication, I spell out the positive aspect of Positive Individualism, which entails explaining how a large group of individuals can work together in order for the members and the community at large to succeed as a group.

I write this with hope that readers will gain a greater understanding of the value of other individuals as well as themselves and consequentially gain more respect for others and themselves. I aim to both critique many current notions of the individual as well as develop and

argue for a more fully enhanced notion of the individual. I extend this analysis to address how and why we should coexist in a positive manner.

CHAPTER 2 THE VALUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL – WHY DO I MATTER?

“You are valuable because you exist. Not because of what you do or what you’ve done, but simply because you are.”-Max Lucado (The Lucado Inspirational Reader)

2.1 Introduction

The notion of individualism cannot have much worth or sense without some sort of value in those individuals. I will attempt to explain what exactly that value is and where it comes from by answering the questions “what constitutes a *person* and what comes with that definition?” In order to answer this, I examine John Locke’s definition of person. I state what I am discussing in regards to individual and then explain the rights associated with that. In examining rights and value, I use Kant and an analysis of his work to derive the standards and value of a person under Positive Individualism.

2.2 Person and Value

John Locke defines person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for anyone to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive” (Locke 1959,586). At first glance, this definition looks appropriate, but it is problematic. One of the problems I find is that it does not address someone who may be in a state in which they cannot self reflect, are not intelligent, and cannot use reason and reflection. What about the mentally ill, or a person in a coma? By this definition, they may be human beings from a biological standpoint, but they would not fall under this category of person. If we have a definition that is exclusive of some, then those who may lack some of these qualities do not deserve the same treatment or have the same value as persons. I find this problematic. Now,

these qualities are important, and there needs to be a distinction between someone in a coma and someone who is active, awake, and making decisions with the ability to consult reason, but they will be applied later on in “Individual Autonomy – It’s Not my Fault.” The standards set in this section, of value, respect and dignity are in reference to biological human beings. I recognize that other life forms can be valuable, and deserving of respect and dignity, but for my purposes, I focus on biological human beings and the world and societies in which we live.

I argue that value is present in *all* biological human beings, not just actively rational ones. To set the stage for this, let me begin by saying that some ideas from Kantian philosophy have seemed to me to provide the most help in understanding human value, respect, and dignity, and in how such ideals are realized in Positive Individualism. In what follows, I use certain ideas that are derivative from Adam Cureton’s presentation of Kant’s philosophy, especially in how I conceptualize human value, respect, and dignity and in how those ideals are used in my notion of Positive Individualism. I amend Cureton’s presentation in order to take into account a series of special cases: those who have had some form of brain damage in an accident, those who were born with some disability that limited the ability to reason, or children or infants without fully developed reason. Surely, such individuals are morally required to retain the same value and deserve the same respect and dignity as those who fully have and exercise reason insofar as they are biological human beings. From my perspective, value and its demands ought to apply to all living human beings, yet on the Kantian and Lockean views it seems that if it is examined with reasonable consistency, one would have to say that those who are not actively rational are not persons and therefore not deserving of the same VRD. This idea excludes certain biological

human beings (like the aforementioned special cases) that I want to include in my development of Positive Individualism.

If biological human beings have value, then it follows that there is a certain way to treat them – with dignity and respect. This applies to all, not just those with active reason. In my view, the importance of treating people with respect and dignity is that they deserve it insofar as they are biological human beings. For example, if a loved one is in a car accident and their mental functions are then impaired, I think most people would agree that they will want that person to be treated in accordance with value, respect, and dignity. The terms ‘value, respect, and dignity’ (hereafter designated as VRD) are in my view, the basis of Positive Individualism.

2.3 Self

In a relevant discussion of the value of persons, it is practical to examine the self. The self that I refer to is the ordinary conscious, physical, and emotional experience that we have that is particular to each individual that we understand through our thought process. One must recognize not only the VRD of persons in reference to others, but ought to begin by recognizing this and what comes with it in the notion of the self. For example, it is of the utmost importance to treat others with respect and help them maintain their dignity by not interfering with it in any negative way. In the same way, this must become the treatment of oneself. We cannot fully understand such qualities as treatment of the other until we understand them through our own self. In fact we cannot fully understand such qualities and treatment of the other until it is understood through the self. Even though a person may be autonomous, that is have the ability to make conscious non-coerced decisions, she should respect herself so as to avoid infringing on her own VRD. If the individual understands the importance of being treated with VRD, then that

could serve as an example of how to treat others. I fully understand that one may consider the kinds of cases in which individuals enjoy receiving and/or inflicting harm upon others or the self. On the basis of Positive Individualism, however, those cases challenge and violate the VRD of the individuals involved. Moving forward, we can understand our feelings and reactions and realize that receiving disrespecting, whether by others or ourselves – self injury or self-deprecating language, or having harm inflicted by someone else – impacts us negatively. On the other hand, having our personal value recognized by ourselves (while straying from arrogance, which is to believe we are more deserving of VRD than others) or others can all have a positive effect. So, understanding how positive and negative words and actions affect us, we can learn to treat others well and in accordance with that positivity.

2.4 Others

Henry David Thoreau captures much of what I want to say in a beautifully conceived, picturesque piece in his work *Civil Disobedience*. He explains a synthesis of how the individual should go about her own pursuits in a world that involves interaction with others when he says “If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too” (10). Because if I, as the individual who deserves VRD, am to pursue and contemplate freely, then I cannot live in a world where others are infringing upon such pursuits of mine. It works in the same way that the individual must not live in a way where he or she is infringing upon others. For example, it would be morally wrong to pursue mass genocide just because one desired to do so. Now as an extreme example, many read that and think it is obvious that one should not pursue mass genocide, but what about cases in which it has happened? In

order for such instances to occur, there had to be people who believed they had a duty to obey the authorities and complied with the orders and pursued this in what they believed would be for the betterment of their society. The fundamental issue was that they infringed upon the right to life of others in the most extreme possible way. Now, there are cases in which those who obey do so not out of what they believe is a duty to obey or believing the authority was right, but because they are threatened. In this case, they act out of fear and their VRD are being infringed upon, so their actions are compromised. They no longer have the same amount of responsibility because of threats and coercion. So one may ask, what about a small-scale example? I want to see what it is like to drive my car at 150 mph. Unless you are in an area that there is pure certainty another individual would not be present or in the vehicle's path, then you are infringing upon the safety, and thus the right to life of others by endangering them through acting upon personal desires and whims without good reason to do so. This could not be acceptable. What about an even less personal or life threatening example? Okay, someone says, "I want an 18 ct. diamond ring, but cannot afford it so I will steal it." Once again, this person cannot pursue this without violating the rights of others because the subject is infringing on the other's right to property. Yes, X is pursuing as X pleases and not physically hurting anybody but there is still a victim – the owner of the ring.

It is important to make clear that I do not speak of a society in which people can do as they please at the expense of others. There will be time later to address morality and ethics within the realm of Positive Individualism. In fact, that is the whole idea here – personal actions cannot be at the expense of others, that is to say, an infringement on their personal VRD. If I

want to do something I have to first ensure that I am not “standing on someone else’s shoulders” as Thoreau puts it.

CHAPTER 3 INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY – IT’S NOT MY FAULT!

“Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn” – Henry David Thoreau (Civil Disobedience)

3.1 Introduction

Now that I established a concept of person, I will examine what brings forth autonomy and responsibility. While in order to be a person one has to have mere potential for reason, it seems autonomy and responsibility can only rightfully be placed upon those persons who actualized rationality – regardless of whether they choose to utilize it or not. In his explanation of autonomy, Robert Paul Wolff states that people “are capable of choosing how they shall act” (12) and later says that man “gives laws to himself, or is self-legislating. In short, he is autonomous” (14). With great autonomy comes great responsibility! Because autonomous individuals have control of their actions, they are necessarily responsible for them and the consequences which they carry. Along with that, comes the necessity of respecting the autonomy of others, as in being careful of the effects of one’s choices and what those choices impose on others. Positive Individualism looks at how autonomy is stripped, how it can be retained, and why autonomy and responsibility matter.

3.2 Influence Over the Social World

Robert Paul Wolff develops a distinction that we will find helpful between the natural and social worlds. He explains that individuals often mistakenly merge the two in thinking that they both work independently of personal influence. Then Wolff clarifies that this conception of the social world as “irreducibly other” is false (72). The natural world is “irreducibly other” in the sense that while we can affect it in certain ways, much occurs in the natural world that we

cannot directly control. The social world, on the other hand, is intrinsically subject to influence of those in it. He also says that “the autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. He may do what another tells him but not because he has been told to do it.” (14). This is a good way to understand the concept of autonomy. Decision and action is focused on personal will rather than having the will of others imposed upon the self. This is not to say that one cannot rightfully take the advice or instruction of another. For example, if one goes into surgery they allow their body to be out of their own control. I make the choice to give myself over to another but it is important to note that if I choose to give up my autonomy, then it is necessary to have the ability to take it back at a later time. “If the individual retains his autonomy by reserving to himself in each instance the final decision whether to cooperate, he thereby denies the authority” (Wolff 40). It is necessary to understand that cooperation is not problematic in and of itself; it can be positive and lead to cohesion, agreement, and understanding. The problem is rooted in blind obedience and submission where personal consideration is not taken into account.

“Men are no better than children if they not only accept the rule of others from force of necessity, but embrace it willingly and forfeit their duty unceasingly to weigh the merits of the actions which they perform. When I place myself in the hands of another and permit him to determine the principles by which I shall guide my behavior, I repudiate the freedom and reason which give me dignity (In Defense of Anarchism, 72, Wolff).”

This is the proper way to act in a society that has government and authority figures – by recognizing that authority is agreed upon and there is no intrinsic authority of one rational person over the other. These governmental authority figures do not carry with them the right to infringe on VRD of others. The moment authority attempts to do so, the receiving agent ought to put a stop to it by retaining her autonomy. There are cases, nevertheless, when victims of human

trafficking, for example, cannot put a stop to it as their lives are imminently threatened and their autonomy was taken away, rather than given up. When autonomy is gone, one is stripped of his or her individuality in their lack of full ability to make autonomous decisions.

3.3 Ideal Values

Thoreau states “but we love better to talk about it - that we say is our mission” (Civil Disobedience, 14). In this statement, he is referring to one of the largest social issues of his time which was slavery. Many were morally opposed to it but took no action against it. This reflects the idea discussed in sociology of ideal values. This concept states that there is a set of values that we like to claim as our own, and then there are our actual values – these are what we practice in real life rather than the things we merely say. In the realm of Positive Individualism this is important because as stated, society is comprised of individuals, so, members of society should hold the other members of their society accountable for holding conflicting real and actual values. They should express to others in the group their contradiction and encourage that them to practice what they claim. This would help avert dissonance and values could then shift from the ideal to the real.

3.4 Thoreau on Autonomy and Responsibility

Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience is a good starting point in understanding both autonomy and responsibility. He argues and explains that individuals ought to not just make verbal complaints here and there about the injustices their society faces, rather individuals ought to do something about them. He offers a small scale example – if someone owes you money you make sure you get it back and that the debt does not occur again. So, why then, do we allow the government to perform injustices and briefly talk about it and then continue on in standard daily affairs (11-12)?

Individuals ought to take an active role in societal matters and be held personally responsible by others in their community for passive attitudes in these instances. In the quote in the beginning of this chapter, Thoreau addresses the power and importance of the individual. We accept the things we see as realities rather than as situation that are contingent upon our acceptance. Because they are indeed contingent upon acceptance, individuals then have a moral responsibility to stand up against societal injustices. Individuals whose autonomy is not currently infringed upon have that ability to stand up and say no to the problem and therefore have the responsibility to do so. One point he makes is that individuals often place responsibility of moral issues on others. “There are thousands in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them who ... say they know not what to do and do nothing...they will wait, well-disposed for others to remedy the evil that they may no longer have it to regret” (8). This statement, placing in any modern social problem as variable x for slavery, rings as true today as it did in Thoreau’s time. It brings the issue of moral responsibility to rise and highlights obligations that members of society have to one another as free agents. The individual often takes it upon herself to find moral faults in society – locally and globally. After finding such problems, however, individuals often expect other group members to take action against it and as a result the individual and the group solve nothing and directly allows such evils to continue. If responsibility for action is always shifted to responsibility of the other, than who accepts that responsibility and acts against it? The group members should accept responsibility and work with one another, bringing about different ideas and perspectives to solve the problem as a group.

It is the case that most large social changes occurred when one or a few individuals did something that made others decide to join in when they realized personal influence and actions carry weight and social influence. Perhaps if individuals' values were recognized more openly and explicitly, individuals would be more likely to speak up and act in defense of morality and ethics, believing they could actually bring forth influence and change. For example, in modern culture many are aware of and opposed to the inhumane way factory farm animals are treated, yet few *do* anything about it. Many claim that their one decision to not eat factory farm and slaughterhouse meat has no effect on the industry, but if everyone who cared decided to protest this treatment, then there would likely be a change in the industry as the demand would go down. Companies would be forced to make a change in order to avoid a detrimental loss of income, and while they may not be eradicated, humane treatment and higher standards in those facilities would have to be implemented. Because the individual believes her voice is small and insignificant she fails to do her part and take responsibility for her contribution to the problem. This is to say acceptance is as guilt ridden and faulty as action itself. In not making some effort to stop the problem and continuing to purchase products created by the industries they claim to stand against, one becomes an accomplice.

Positive Individualists, who learn their personal worth and value, who know that others would consider their word of value as well, would be far more likely to act in accordance with moral scruples and in one way or another, more people would become an activist for what they believe rather than remaining in the audience in the show of what goes on around us. (Thoreau, 8-10.)

CHAPTER 4 FALSE INDIVIDUALISM – DO WE WALK THE WALK?

*“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society” – Jiddu Krishnamurti
(Think on These Things, 1964)*

4.1 Introduction

The United States is both criticized by outsiders and internally proud of its alleged individualistic society. Hui and Villareal’s study shows a correlation, that many seem to agree with, between values associated with selfishness and isolation, and individualism (“Individualism-Collectivism And Psychological Needs: Their Relationships In Two Cultures”) Positive Individualism will ask just how legitimate the individualism of the United States is. It seems that the U.S. offer themselves up as a shining beacon of freedom in which one can do as he or she pleases and what is best for oneself. People here believe they can do as they see fit for themselves, yet frequently find themselves limited in pursuing that ability. Norms, from a sociological standpoint, are what regulate a society as a set of unofficial or unwritten rules that guide appropriate behavior, speech, and values. Treading too far out of the bounds of these norms, regardless of what type of society one lives in, leaves one ostracized and isolated. As people begin to see the negative societal response for norm violations, they learn not to deviate from the norms and individuals frequently silence themselves in fear of those consequences. . Schwartz article “Awareness of Interpersonal Consequence, Responsibility Denial, and Volunteering” indicates that awareness of consequences leads to heavy influence on behavior. It states that “the norms that are activated when the consequences are brought to awareness cannot as easily be neutralized by denial of consequences.” A common value in America is to follow the “American Dream” which entails going to school, working hard, getting a career, starting a family and making lots of money to support that family. Working towards this “dream” has become a norm that many follow. Unfortunately only a narrow margin of career paths allow for

this type of dream to happen. In turn, people frequently give up their passions – whether it be a career in photography or art, in the name of doing what is expected of them. Amongst adolescents, admitting to having interests other than those of the dominant social group can be cause for social rejection so people of almost all ages either conform to what is acceptable or have to endure in solitude. Although there are many subcultures, which help individuals find others who share similar associations and interests, there seems to be certain overarching norms that apply to the majority of those cultures. Oftentimes, those more widespread norms can lead to individuals losing bits and pieces of their personalities and varying cultural backgrounds because conformity to those overarching norms is the most common way to be both socially and financially successful in the United States. Kyung Hee Kim’s study, “The Creativity Crisis: The Decrease in Creative Thinking Scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking” demonstrates that creativity from elementary to high school has decreased over 85% between 1984 and 2008. The study suggests that this is a result of increased pressure on standardized testing and entrance exams and a decrease in creativity encouraging teaching methods in schools (Kim). All this, traces back to the norms instilled through pursuing the American Dream. It is necessary to look at the false individualism in a very practical sense in order to understand what makes it false and the problems resulting from that.

4.2 Norms and Functionalism

Despite the freedoms Americans claim to have, it seems that they do not go very far, while on the inside it may seem as though freedoms and capabilities are endless. However when one steps back far enough one can see boundaries and limits in many ways. There is a world of possibility that begins with individual potentiality that ought to be explored. Sociological

Functionalists seem to believe that if someone steps too far out of bounds, the system goes out of whack, but this is a problem - What if the system itself is broken? (Chambliss, Eglitis, Ch. 1; Henslin, Ch. 2). In sociology, functionalism is one example of a widely held view that inherently takes away from the individual by valuing society more. Sociological functionalists standardly refer to society as a machine or a body where each part serves a certain function (Chambliss, Eglitis, Ch. 1; Henslin, Ch. 2). This could be taken to imply that individuals are parts and objects. While a comparison to a machine would not be wrong if we all were able to live out our *individual* functions to the fullest etc., the problem comes in when our value and purpose is placed on how we fit into the machine, not how the machine will take shape for us. As Thoreau claims, "I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society...If a plant cannot live according to its nature it dies, and so a man" (19). The individual should be able to explore and live according to her nature, rather than be constricted to playing a part to a whole, and in fact does not have the responsibility to do so.

4.3 Obedience as a Problem

Despite the alleged American Individualism, the actual case may be that individuals in American society are highly obedient in accordance with their social roles that they are often afraid to deviate from, but obedience is a large part of the problem. It especially shows up in an understanding of false individualism where the individual gives up the power of her voice, in accordance with obedience. The individual is taught to compromise and constrain the full power of her voice, and much of this is because of social roles. The famous studies by Zimbardo and Milgram should be noted here. Reading through the original material, and later watching "The Human Behavior Experiments" film, which had direct footage and interviews of these studies

and some of the people involved in them really made the product of social norms very clear. Zimbardo's study essentially took innocent people who knew they were going into a psychology study and randomly assigned them roles as either prisoners or guards. In the beginning the prisoners were not so willing to do as the guards said and everyone seemed to keep in mind that the setting was not real, however, it did not take long for these roles to transform the men. Almost every prisoner had a mental breakdown as a result of the harsh treatment of the guards. The study had to end in only six days because of the mental stress that these innocent men were undergoing because of the ruthlessness the guards demonstrated in order to properly fit into their assigned role (Zimbardo 1999; *The Human Behavior Experiments*). The Milgram study, in which participants had to ask someone a series of questions, as instructed by a man in a lab coat, perceived to be a person of credibility and power, was another show of the power of obedience roles. In this, the participants were to send electric shocks to the stranger every time a question was answered wrong at increased voltages that were said to be deadly. While no one was injured in the study as it was set up, it demonstrated that most people would simply obey the man in the lab coat to continue causing what they believed was immediate pain and harm to the stranger. Documentation of the study shows people asking if they had to keep going, and it only took little convincing and reassurance from the person in the lab coat for participants to continue (Milgram, 1986; *The Human Behavior Experiments*). These famous studies are just two examples of the ways in which individuals will take on assigned roles and how far they are willing to go to stay within the bounds of those roles. The subscription to obedience of most roles, will often compromise personal convictions, worries, and morals. How much greater are these effects when a person is raised from a young age to believe that their roles are a part of their identity? America

has this strong claim to individualism, but with the many roles and norms so readily taken on by its citizens, it seems that individuality may not be so free after all. In fulfilling the American duty to conform and be an appropriate citizen, individuals often take the roles given to them and can be more concerned with fulfilling them than with doing what they believe to be right as demonstrated by the participants of the Zimbardo experiment. So, even if an individual disagrees with something that an authority figure like a teacher, an officer, or a government official does, being obedient in her lesser role can overpower her inclinations against the actions or demands of the authority figure.

4.4 Fear Tactics - Obedience and Government

Thoreau explains that individuals believe they need approval through persuasion before action. He explains that the government should want to hear criticism from its people in order to improve. Instead, it silences and reprimands those who seek change and call out its flaws and injustices. Those whose roles are not that of authority are aware that there are often negative consequences that will be implemented if one speaks out or acts in a way that exceeds the bounds of what is necessary as “citizen” and this reinforces obedience (Thoreau, 11-14).

It can be easily interpreted that Thoreau believes that people are both suppressed and corrupted by their government. Government takes away from autonomy and compromises integrity because citizens constantly have to choose between being penalized by the government or silently accepting injustices. He boldly states that “It costs... less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the state than it would to obey. I should feel as if I were worth less in that case” (17). He prides himself on standing up against injustices and refusing to conform. I think every individual ought to remember the importance of this - that the state is created by

people and we have a right and moreover an obligation to speak out and disobey when something is not right. Allowing corruption to continue compromises our integrity, morality and autonomy.

In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau states, “thus the state never intentionally confronts a man’s sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest” (19). Force is tied in with obedience. If there is a chance of deviance, force is set in as a reminder that one can and will be subdued. United States police officers offer some of the most common interaction with local citizens. They also bring about the most force and brutality, and an extreme play on power. In an age of technology (which brings about its own problems, to be discussed soon) many citizens use their cell phones as a means to document police interactions as proof in case there is any sort of discrepancy in the case. The *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy* shows that in many cases, citizens using this is often interpreted as a threat to the power and authority of the officer, and they end up attempting to destroy the evidence in cases of their own misconduct and sometimes “arrest the civilians behind cameras on other frivolous charges” (Shaw, "Our Duty In Light Of The Law's Irrelevance: Police Brutality And Civilian Recordings"). Why is it that these government officials are using force against citizens who simply want documentation of interaction? If the citizens were in the wrong and not the officers, then why would they go out of their way to bring down the person who wants accurate recordings of the interactions? Perhaps it is because the force, violence, and abuse of power is something that they want concealed so they can continue on in abusing civilians and infringing on their rights. While the government, or in a smaller scale, even school officials may claim promotion of freedom and individual pursuits, it seems

that because of this forced illegitimate power, many people end up obeying. These structures set up to clearly instill the role of subservient to authority are extremely harmful to the individual. They devalue, disrespect and do not recognize the dignity of the individual and violate autonomy as well.

4.5 Minority Individuality Limited

Robert Paul Wolff comes into play here as he sees many problems with American society – namely the governmental aspect of it. There is a common misconception that a minority is defined in terms of numbers. Minority is “a group that is discriminated against on the basis of its members’ physical or cultural characteristics” (Henslin 299). It is the group that lacks social and political power in a society, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2012, American minority groups consisting of Black or African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, mixed race, and Hispanic or Latinos made up over 116 million citizens (2014). That is, over 116 million *individuals* susceptible to minority discrimination. As Wolff states “If a man knows that he is in the minority, he will realize that he has no chance of effecting his will. This is the characteristic of majoritarian democracy which drives permanent minorities into rebellion, and permits... the tyranny of the majority” (44). The tyranny of the majority, a conception of John Stuart Mill, is a notion that comes from democratic governments where the majority imposes its will upon the minorities. On such a large scale as that of America, this now becomes a large scale problem. This tyranny, as Mill states, extends beyond the political realm, influencing minorities even more than initially thought. Mill properly addresses that society cripples the individual, and the problems he addressed then, are still prominent today (*On Liberty*).

A positive individualist society would likely lead to a situation in which there was no government because those in the society would recognize that no one can should be in a position of authority over another. It would hopefully be, as Wolff describes, “a society, that is to say, which has achieved a level of moral and intellectual development at which superstitious beliefs in legitimacy of authority have evaporated” (80). Under the circumstances in which government did still exist, it would have to be one where those in power positions would have to remember that people are not just numbers on a paper or dollar signs for funding. They would have to respect the citizens that they govern and those in government would need to be held to a standard in which they do so. They would not be willing to compromise the valuable individuals whom they claim to look out for – policy would genuinely be in the best interest of the population.

CHAPTER 5 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS – ARE CONSTRUCTS SYNONYMOUS WITH CONSTRAINTS?

*“When a boy is asked what he wants to be, he is really being asked which already existing social role he wishes to adopt as an adult. ... He may see himself, at least in a society like ours, as exercising some control over the roles which he shall adopt; but neither the questioner nor the boy would suppose that either of them has any control over the existence and nature of the roles themselves” – Robert Paul Wolff
(In Defense of Anarchism, 74)*

5.1 Introduction

The problem of social constructs and norms is slightly explained in False Individualism, but unlike false individualism, this is found throughout Eastern and Western societies alike. What I mean by social constructs is concepts that exist because of socially constructed definitions. This is to say, they would not exist outside of human conception. A prime example is the distinction between sex and gender. While the two are heavily associated, sex is biologically true in the sense that individuals are born with varying anatomies that are distinct whether there is language for it or not. Gender, on the other hand is a social construct in that it is created through cultural and traditional associations of masculinity and femininity. Gender is not a verity inseparable from sex. One acts in accordance with gender and can choose to do or not to do so. Social constructs, such as gender roles, are among the worst destroyers of individuality as will be explained. Many are oblivious to just how detrimental they can be. This chapter will delve into further detail about gender and of the problem of social constructs by examining one of the other notable social constructs – race and ethnicity. The sociological perspective of self and norms will be explained in order to establish these ideas further.

5.2 Social Norms

Breaking societal norms brings about a frenzy. I recently took part in something called a doing nothing experiment. My class which had between sixty and seventy students went out to a

popular part of campus and just stood there – doing nothing. People slowly began to gather round, they stared, they asked questions, and went as far as taking pictures and videos: they were anticipating something. Something as simple as standing casually and not using phones or talking to people led to immediate attention from the public. The fact that people cannot calmly do as they please, be it nothing, without evoking discomfort and confusion amongst others reflects the way we are strongly subject to the norms of our society. This is problematic because autonomy is then limited – individuals must constantly think twice about any decision that may potentially break norms and decide if it is worth the consequence of people’s responses. Thinking before actions in terms of reason and morality is positive, but judging personal actions based off norms that are not rooted in reason is problematic and limiting.

5.3 The Delusions of Gender

In the field of neuroscience, Cordelia Fine wrote a book entitled *Delusions of Gender* that offers fascinating evidence that provides support from yet another field for Positive Individualism. Her book demonstrates that gender differences are social products rather than inherent. This book gathers a collection of psychology and neurological studies that demonstrate that when put on a level playing field, ensuring that gender is not salient in the test setting, men and women score about the same on average in a wide variety of tests rating empathy, leadership abilities, and science and math skills. These studies showed that ability and capability are equal among the sexes, which comes a surprise to many. What does equal ability among men and women have to do with individualism? The categories defined even before birth falsely skews perception of the individual. If people are looked at and evaluated on a case by case basis, rather than stereotyped and assumed to be one way or another, society would be able to grow as

individuals could truly explore their personal strengths and interests without fear of breaking gender norms, or reinforcing stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is the threat of acting in such a way that one confirms negative stereotypes about a group that they are a part of (Steele and Aronson 1995). Exposing the falsity of these roles could potentially help get rid of thoughts and ideas like this one: “My gender is a factor of which I have no control, and because of that gender I cannot excel in this class.” This could encourage people to pursue their interests without fear of inadequacy or breaking norms.

One study that she discusses notes that parents treat male and female babies differently regardless of their behavior or ability. Mothers have a tendency to converse and interact with female babies more than male babies. It is suggested that this socializes boys towards independence. Another study about babies demonstrated that mothers tended to overestimate male physical abilities and underestimate female physical ability (Fine, 198-199.) As the chapter progresses, Fine states “even though they sincerely claim to hold the two sexes as equal, parents simultaneously devalue the feminine and limit boys’ access to it” (204). Later on Fine addresses a study about infant tendencies towards certain toys. “Psychologist Gerianne Alexander and her colleagues measured how long five- to six-month old babies looked at a pink dolly and a blue truck. There weren’t any differences between boys and girls in how long they looked at each type of toy...At just one year of age – when offered cars, dolls, beauty sets, and so on- boys and girls have been found to play in sex-stereotypical ways in the lab” (204-205). All this research suggests how so much of gender is shaped at a young age, by parents’ implicit (and sometimes explicit) attitudes towards it. As gender roles are assigned to infants and children, they act in

accordance with them. This carries over into adolescence and adult life, and starts again as they become parents.

This passage from *Delusions of Gender* really helps to explain why gender stereotypes (norms) being perpetuated can be problematic. “At first, it’s not obvious why an advertisement depicting, say, a woman bouncing on her bed in rapture over a new acne product might serve as a psychic obstacle to women looking to enter masculine fields. However, images of women fretting over their appearance or in ecstasy over a brownie mix, although they have nothing to do with mathematic ability directly, nonetheless make gender stereotypes in general more accessible” (Fine, 43). She then goes on to discuss a study by Paul Davies that showed that women who took an exam that included math and verbal questions after seeing gender neutral ads answered more math than verbal questions. When they watched sexist ads first, the women avoided math problems.

Fine goes through a series of studies that indicate that much of the “inherent” gender differences scientific studies have aimed to prove tend to diminish or disappear when certain factors in the studies are altered. She explains that in some situations they have taken studies where males tend to perform better and alter the study to say that high performance is linked to feminine activities, males performed much lower (*Delusions of Gender*, 28). She then explains that a study was done in which one group was “primed with gender, while another group was primed with their exclusive private-college identity. Women who had been induced to think of themselves as a student...enjoyed performance boost, scoring significantly higher than gender-primed women... Likewise men and women primed with an irrelevant ... stereotype performed similarly on the...task” (28). These results are quite significant. One can understand from these

studies that gender salience makes a significant difference in performance. While these may seem like small examples, gender is often salient in many every day environments from school to work and this suggests that if society was structured in such a way that it were not, then perhaps the inherent equality between the sexes could be recognized. Individuals could be evaluated and considered based on their *personal* ability and performance. This would not only effect the way others view the individual but also how allow the individual to go into situations willing to find out their potential for something instead of assuming they are disadvantaged because of their gender.

5.4 The Problem of “Isms”

A productive way to understand the problems of social constructs is by looking at the problem of “isms.” *Sexism* and *racism* are going to be of particular focus as they are the most salient in any modern heterogeneous society and direct products of gender and race. It would be useful to explicitly define both, for matters of consistency and clarity and to explain that they are being used in terms of ordinary language and understanding, as defined by the basics of sociology. Racism is an institutionalized relationship “between dominant and minority groups that create a structure of economic, social and political inequality based on socially constructed racial or ethnic categories” (Intro to Sociology G-7). Sexism is “the belief that one sex is innately superior to the other” and the discrimination that supports that belief (Henslin 504).

The fact that these constructs were created in the first place and have existed in so many forms for so many years raises a question – do “isms” exist because the dominant group finds other groups to be a threat or, are is the dominant group frightened at the idea of an individuality that exceeds the bounds of the framework they established? What I mean to say is that there are

certain power structures and hierarchies, whether they be bureaucratic, religious, or patriarchal it seems that these hierarchies have ensured that the minority groups remain in their lesser positions, with decreased opportunity in one way or another, and nearly always resisting opposition and change. Marx offers one explanation of this through his idea of conflict theory. This theory, in its most basic understanding, states that there is a ruling and subject class, and the ruling class retains its power through exploitation of the subject class. It states that there is a struggle and battle between the classes, causing conflict throughout society. Some propose that the reason women and blacks were refused an education for so long was out of fear they would utilize it and become powerful groups of their own – forces to reckon with. In fact, early American states went so far as to enact something called ignorance laws, where slave owners would be charged fines if they taught the slaves how to read and write. Those in power at the time believed that “an educated Black might realize how horribly he was treated and revolt” (Erickson). This presented an imminent threat to those in power. It is also possible that the dominant groups felt that their members, as “superiors,” had a right to explore their individual interests and values and feared that if minority groups rose up, they would take away from their ability to do so. Essentially more people with access to limited resources means less resources available for each individual. This is an idea properly attributed to Hardin in *his Tragedy of the Commons* (1968). He goes a step further in saying that these limited resources lead to conflict as everyone is now fighting for their share and working to take as much for themselves as they can, and it seems that creating these “isms” helps reduce the competition for these resources. Maintaining individuals in their set roles suppresses the minority individuals and allows the “important” ones to do as they please with greater freedom and fewer obstacles.

5.5 Media and Sexism

It is useful to examine a current media perpetuated form of sexism – that many may not initially think of as sexism. A large majority of late night talk show hosts are males, while daytime and morning talk show hosts are female. From a marketing perspective, TV networks target different demographics with their shows. So what are the differences between these types of shows and who would each try to reach? Let's take a look. Popular daytime TV shows: Oprah, Ellen, The View. These all tend to go on between morning and midday. What do they generally discuss? Self-Help/Inspirational Books, celebrity gossip, recipes etc. All these topics are generally female related. Late night shows, on the other hand, have hosts such as J Leno, Conan O'Brien, Jimmy Fallon, and George Lopez. Their discussion topics often center on extremely crude and frequently sexualized humor, and celebrities in more male targeted films and shows.

So why are these different types of shows directed at the different genders, and what does their time have to do with it? Typically, men are expected to be hard at work, fulfilling their role as the one who “brings home the bacon” during the daytime and would therefore miss these shows that offer their hard work some comedic relief if they were earlier. As for the more feminine shows, they tend to take place during mid-day and morning because if they are too early they would be dropping their kids off for school. Along with that, they could not take place in the late afternoon or evening because that would interfere with the service they are supposed to be providing their husbands and children. To clarify, this is not to say that these shows should stop all together because they reinforce gender roles. It is simply important to recognize that this is one of many portions of media– namely television – that is representative of the ways in

which, even if it is not explicitly stated, women and men constantly have gender roles imposed upon them.

It is important to remember that Positive Individualism does not state that there is anything inherently wrong in a woman's *choice* to stay at home or for a man to *choose* to go to work. Either of these are noble pursuits with their own merits and rewards. The issue Positive Individualism wants to address is that choice is the key factor. Norms being so deeply entrenched in society make social interactions difficult for the working mother or the stay at home father. The problem lies in individual members of society, as well as the media strictly perpetuating these roles and reacting negatively to those who choose not to subscribe to them.

5.6 Robert Paul Wolff

Robert Paul Wolff touches on societal roles and describes it eloquently as demonstrated in the quote at the beginning of the chapter. He also states, "The adolescent goes through a period of role definition during which he tentatively tries on a variety of roles, in order to test their appropriateness for him. Thus, the social world presents to each individual an objective reality with independently existing structures" (Wolff 73). Humans created society and are now constrained by it. We are limited by our own creation. Perhaps if more individuals decided to question the nature of the potential roles, they would realize there are more than the previously set options. Individuals could be free to both explore and try on many roles and create new ones. Better yet, the individual could have a variety of characteristics that appeal to that individual and there does not have to be any role at all, rather, the individual in her purest form, making autonomous decisions, unrestricted by roles and labels. If individuals took this type of approach,

other individuals would be able to engage with one another rid of assumptions and stereotypes and simply take the individual for what she is, not what is assumed she is or is not like.

CHAPTER 6 THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE COMMUNITY – WHAT ABOUT EVERYONE ELSE?

“I am he, as you are he, as you are me, and we are all together.” – The Beatles

6.1 Introduction

The final section will address what may be the most obvious question – can this idea function properly in a society or community? Well, yes. The biggest strength within Positive Individualism is that it is intended to be implemented throughout a community setting. This is much of what sets it apart from traditional conceptions of individualism. Kant’s categorical imperative, explained as acting in such a way that one could will that maxim becomes a universal law, can be easily applied to Positive Individualism (Guyer, “Categorical Imperative”). The categorical imperative essentially means that a person should only perform actions that should be applied universally. For example, if a person is going to lie in a situation, they should first think, is lying a maxim that people should do all the time? If the answer is no, then the person should not do such actions. It is a standard for morality. Kant also asserts that people should not treat others as a means to an end, rather as ends in themselves (Walsh, “Kant, Immanuel”). This goes back to the idea of VRD. If others are to be valued, then people would have to treat one another as ends in themselves. Also, if individuals are treated with VRD then it seems the way they are treated would almost always be something that could (and should) become a universalized maxim. A key notion to remember here is that Positive Individualism is not based upon Utilitarian principles, based off the desires and happiness of the majority, while not minding those at whose expense community decisions are being made. Positive Individualism undermines no one and is a foundation with which to build up from. There is no

way to dig down from the basic notions of Positive Individualism without violating some sort of fundamental rights.

In looking to understand how the individual and society can fit together, one might ask if the value of a whole is equal to the value of the sum of its parts. Applied here, is the value of society that of all its individuals combined or does society have a value on its own regardless of the “parts?” It seems that this would really just be a useless question altogether. Seeing as society is a mere social construct – that is, it has no reality or value outside of a social setting, it is safe to say that it has no inherent value at all. Its value can only be viewed in a practical sense in terms of what an organized and functional society offers those in it. It is important to realize that Positive Individualism does *not* say there is no value or benefit to community, it is just that the value is found as an object to serve the individuals rather than the other way around.

6.2 Communitarianism and Individualism

Communitarianism and Individualism are conflicting theories and are some of the more applied ideologies today. Gathering from different sources, it seems that communitarianism, in its different forms consistently carries certain themes and ideas. One is a limit on individual rights for the benefit of the group. Communitarianism additionally finds that a society cannot be fully cohesive when its members carry widely varying ethical views and standards because these differences in morality would lead to conflict (Crowder, George; Kymlicka, Will). It also always advocates the thought that community is the root of moral value (Crowder, George). In conjunction with this, they have a tendency to say that the self is only valued within the context of a community (Reiner, Toby). On the other hand, Individualism’s variations are all fundamentally rooted in individual rights and their ability for self-expression, development, and

creativity (Ham, Chae-bong, “The Cultural Challenge to Individualism”). It views equality as a matter of prime importance and shows preference to individual inclinations and goals over those of the community at large (Triandis, “Individualism and Collectivism”). Research shows that both communitarian and individualist ideologies evoke many positive traits resulting from their adoption. In C. Harry Hui and Marcelo J. Villareal’s study *Individualism-Collectivism and Psychological Needs: Their Relationships in Two Cultures*, their findings indicate the characteristics most strongly associated with people living in both types of societies. In this case, they studied Americans for the Individualists and Chinese for the Communitarians. The study suggests that Individualists tend towards independence, control and dominating one’s environment (311). For Individualists, self is associated with survival and, in contrast, Communitarians believe groups are the key to survival (311). The study demonstrated that there was a “negative correlation with preference for autonomy” among collectivists. They demonstrated less need for independence and nonconformity (314). All of these are traits strongly associated with individualist ideologies. It is important for people to take pride in autonomy, independence, and in some cases nonconformity (if there is something wrong with the society with which the individual is being told to conform to). On the other hand the study showed a desire for affiliation, succorance, and nurturance among the Chinese subjects.

Most believe that there is strong distinction between the ideologies - there seems to be a false dichotomy here. The aforementioned traits from both methods of thinking can all have many benefits for both the individual and the group. There ought to be a synthesis of the thoughts in which there is a merging of the strengths of each. Affiliation, nurturance and succorance need not be opposed to independence, autonomy, and nonconformity. Humans have a

biological desire for social interaction as humans are group animals. Humans also carry a distinctive feature, inherent potential for rationality and those with active rational abilities are autonomous and can therefore make personal decisions. These decisions can be made with or without the opinions of others in their group. One can take into account and consult others, but she is ultimately capable and will make the decision on her own assuming she is not being deprived of her autonomy. It is important to utilize reason here, for the individual to decipher if the ideas of her fellow group members can help or offer an alternative to her initial thoughts, or if it reinforces that her initial inclinations were right. If humans took their group tendencies seriously, they could attend to their desire to be nurtured, part of a group, and feel secure. At the same time, they can be independent by doing things for themselves and not expecting others to do things for them, they could retain their autonomy by ultimately making their own decision, as was just explained, and even be non-conformists by thinking for themselves and making their own decisions and not compromising their personal ideologies and rights for self-expression and exploration.

6.3 Social Norms and Deviance as Models

In order to understand how Positive Individualism can work in a society I will explain the way a community or society should function under this proposal. Community should be supportive of the ideas or thoughts of those within it. It should be a place where there can be open, honest, and constructive discussion of one another, and the views, strengths, and weaknesses each has. A Positive Individualistic society strives to be one that maintains a strong sense of importance of the individuals. It should always be kept in the minds of those in it that society is there to serve and benefit the individuals that compose it, not the other way around.

At the end of *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau explains that the best or highest state needs to be derived entirely from the people. The state is obliged to treat all its members justly and it must recognize the individual as a higher and independent power. Those in the state are neighbors and equals are committed to treating one another as such. Because the state is dependent upon individuals, it is responsible for being concerned with the welfare of every individual within it (27-28). Many modern societies, both communitarian (directly) and individualist (indirectly) focus on the individual not as valuable in his or her own right, but by what he or she does for society. It is important to examine if this is the case of a particular society and it sees that society often ends in this, but does not necessitate this type of treatment. In the case that it does result in this, where the state takes away from the VRD of the individual, than that society should be eradicated or at the very least, heavily modified and reformed.

The functionalist perspective in sociology, previously examined in chapter four, offers insight into some of the problems of modern societies and exemplifies what Positive Individualism aims to avoid. While some may say that the parts are important to a properly working whole, if one part, or individual, does not conform or fit their specific social function, then under sociological functionalism, he or she is deemed a problem. There is a term for this called deviance, which is when one violates a social norm. Deviance should not always be considered a bad thing. Many norms, such as cases of racism and sexism, throughout history have proven to be highly problematic. In each of those cases, it took instances of deviance – faced with outrageous opposition – to help overcome these problems and shed light on them. Many names of “greats” who were also deviant come to mind – Martin Luther King, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Goldman, and Rosa Parks to name a few. These are simply here to

demonstrate that deviance can be positive and constructive and oftentimes the necessary catalyst in helping individuals be free of oppressive and constraining norms. The individual should not have to fear deviating from norms if the norms are violating individuals' VRD.

6.4 Positive Individualist Morality

Moral and ethical issues are the source of most if not all conflicts within any given society. It is important to explain, drawing from what has been discussed previously in this document that the goal is not to adhere to every individual's desires and whims rather to *respect* them. Still, there have to be some basic principles of morality and ethics established as I do not support subjective morality. In this case, I will describe and situate brief standards. They are to be brief for my purposes as there can be an entire other project dedicated solely to setting up a universal moral standard and that is not what is called for here. As anyone living in some sort of group would likely be aware of, not everyone believes the same things are "right" and "wrong" or "good" and "bad." Given the framework for Positive Individualism, even those who are wrong in their ideas should have the ability to be outspoken and stand for what they believe without being violated in their VRD for it. Under my framework, a definitive set of universal rights and wrongs would naturally unfold and become quite clear. It has to be understood that every human being has a right to life, is valuable through their inherent capacity for reason, and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity on a fundamental level as has been established in section one. Resulting from these conceptions, murder and injury would neither be justified nor excused. Because autonomy is one of the most important aspects of Positive Individualism, institutions, constructs, and individual actions that violated the VRD and autonomy of the individual would be necessarily intrinsically wrong.

In contrast, much of what causes conflict in today's culture is an overt concern for actions that do not infringe on the VRD or autonomy of anyone else involved. Under Positive Individualism, it would become clear that such actions, that are merely matters of preference, opinion, and non-VRD-infringing self-expression are, in fact, amoral. So, what many people consider moral or immoral acts today would not be sources of conflict as people could understand that they carry no moral value. Most conflict would subside as people began to realize that certain issues and choices of other people are not inherently right or wrong and therefore would no longer be a cause for clash. While this does have to be recognized as a large and difficult feat that many would struggle to come to terms with initially, if a society came about where all members thought about and abided by these basic standards, individuals would be part of a more peaceful, reasonable, and functional world. This world would ultimately benefit all those who are part of it – not just the majority. As Ayn Rand put it so eloquently “peaceful coexistence . . . can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights” (Virtue of Selfishness, 122).

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